

Honoring Our Shared Vision / San Juan County Future Scenario

(Joe Symons, Olga, Orcas Island, 2024)

Overview:

San Juan County Washington (SJC), located in the Salish Sea northwest of Seattle, has been experiencing growth challenges for over 5 decades. The county pivoted from a resource based economy to tourism and 2nd home construction beginning in the 1970's, when it became the fastest growing county in the state.

For decades, County Council has *proactively chosen to avoid conversation* as well as action regarding the growth potential of the county (as defined by the land use density map; see newspaper article from 1977 below). The buildout population of the county, as defined by the density map, is many multiples of the current population. Indeed, were every tax parcel developed to its legal maximum, SJC would be home to just over 130,000 people. This number *does not include visitors*. The 2020 population of the county (based on [US Census data for 2020](#)) is just over 17,582, so the legal maximum population of SJC is over 7x larger than it is now.

There is no restriction on the number or location of building permits issued by the county. There is no information on the county's carrying capacity. There is a *substantial* inconsistency between the official *Vision Statement* for the county and the buildout potential baked in to the current density map. None of these topics has benefitted from public exposure and conversation.



Is this for real?

Could the buildout population really be around 130,000?

Here is an excerpt from an email from Cindy Wolf (Council member from District 2, Orcas and Waldron) which I received on 10 May 2021 (the reference to Erika refers to Erika Shook, DCD director, who no longer works for San Juan County, nor, for that matter, does Council Member Cindy Wolf):

"Erika explained this to me and that there were few remedies short of vacating the platt (sic) and potentially bankrupting the county with lawsuits. Everyone believes you because you are correct. No one seems to know what to do about it. My head is still swimming from figuring this out three weeks ago."

Notwithstanding Councilperson Wolf's comment above, Councilperson Wolf voted against a request to officially confirm the population estimate.

In order to provide background and context to the issue of growth management in SJC, I was asked to give a presentation to a group of interested residents.

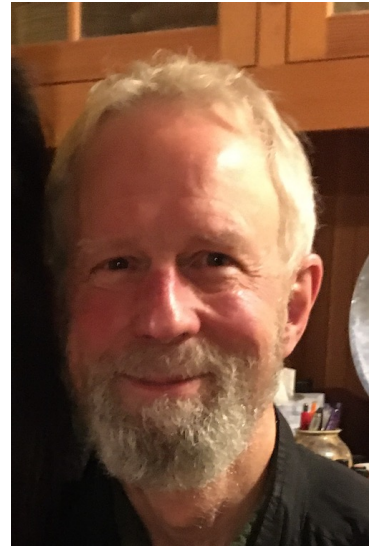
The presentation:

(Presentation by Joe Symons, January 2021)

A zoom recording of the presentation is at doebay.net/bigpicture.mp4

Short on time?

A transcript of the presentation is at doebay.net/bigpicturepresentationtranscript.pdf



Action Steps:

Take a breath. There is a lot of information. Blow the smoke from the room. This is nitty gritty. No one, including me, wants to wade deep into this misleading jungle in order to suss out the truth. It might seem overwhelming and you might just want to bag it. Please don't. What's on the table is your future experience of living and working in San Juan County as told by a 50 year on-site local who innocently agreed to participate in a process about which he, and every other local on the CP committees, knew nothing about.

- Watch or read the transcript of the presentation;
- Write a letter to the County Council (council@sanjuanco.com). (Details on how to prepare a letter are provided at the end of this document.)

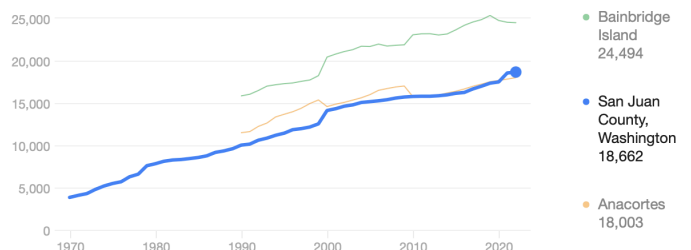
Constraints and Considerations:

SCOTUS affirms that Land Use decisions are exclusively the purview of counties: not the feds, nor the states, nor cities.

The Comprehensive Plan (CP) is the legal foundation for all land use activities in SJC.

San Juan County / Population

18,662 (2022)

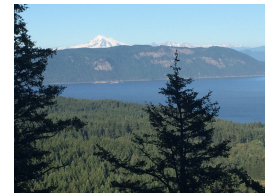


The U.S. Census from 1870-1970 reveals that the county population during that 100 year time period averaged about 3900.

The current county population is close to 5x the average pre-1970 population (the 2024 census estimate for the county is 18,668; google does not show a population estimate for June 2025). In the “*really??*” department, the 2022 US census population estimate for SJC (see above chart) is 18,662, and the 2024 population estimate (ask Dr. Google) is 18, 668. You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to wonder how after 2 years the population of the county grew by only 6 people.

This is the kind of sussing that no one does nor, obviously, does anyone question the reliability of the data. The whole CP update process, since 1992, is pressure-soaked with this kind of invisibility and obscure “whaa??” that few have the patience and curiosity to unpack. For me, tis been an in-your-face stream of doublespeak. I was simultaneously graced and cursed with a finely tuned bs detector and a dose of permanent love for this archipelago (as if it were my kid) that I can’t allow myself to ignore. Cindy’s “whaa” moment was prompted by my conversations with her. It was not prompted by anyone in DCD telling her and the other council members what was really going on in the back rooms.

My *uncontested* [1999 brief](#) before the Western Washington Growth Management Hearing Board (WWGMHB) unambiguously demonstrated that, using SJC data, the SJC buildout population—based on the 1979 density map—was 175,000.



There are *no restrictions on the number of building permits issued by SJC per year*. SJC does not illuminate this reality; it has to be inferred by the lack of any regulations restricting the issuance of permits. Recall that the US Census only measures full time residents and does not include population figures for visitors/tourists.

Regardless of the intent of the Vision statement and the CP, SJC’s future is not determined by the Vision or the CP. *The future of the county is determined by the market*. The CP is effectively toothless. In addition, SJC has minimal to non-existent enforcement.

Relevant Documents

[Toto pulls the curtain](#): How were population growth issues handled by SJC? This background information is not available anywhere including the SJC website.

[“Nantucket Study”](#) / Study of Socioeconomic Impacts of Growth Pressure in Selected Seasonal/Resort Communities. Very short version: SJC is on precisely the same evolutionary pathway as

EDITORIALS

★ Opinions ~ Letters ★



The Future Density

At the plan hearing in Friday Harbor both Dick Franck and Jack Powell, co-owners of the Wooden Shoe Farm, protested the forty-acre density restriction on their property. Dick Willard, owners of the Blazing Tree Ranch, also protested the plan restrictions, and implied he would sue. Many others in Friday Harbor and on Orcas and Lopez similarly objected very strongly to the density restrictions.

Yet the proposed forty-acre density on the Wooden Shoe would result in something over a twelve-fold increase in density. The proposed ten-acre density on most of the Blazing Tree would result in a seventy-fold increase in density. The five-acre density asked for by Franck and Powell would be a hundred-fold increase in density.

A twelve-fold density increase on all land in the county would provide for 78,000 people, if the current population is used as a base. Summer population would be in addition to this.

A fifty, seventy, or hundred-fold increase in population is all but incomprehensible. That probably is not what Franck, Willard, and the others had in mind, except for their own property.

But the plan, restrictive as it is considered, does provide for a very substantial increase in population. Just how many it does provide for, in addition to the existing divided parcels, is not stated. No one has asked that question, but it should be asked.....and answered!

Any plan, and particularly this plan, should have some specified objectives. Population is one we can all understand.

The projected population under the comprehensive plan could be spelled out in fairly concrete — or rather “flesh and blood” — terms. Nearly everyone can relate to that in terms of people in ferry lines, people drawing water from the ground, and perhaps a twelve, fifty, or hundred fold increase in the size of the garbage dumps.

It would be the work of not more than a day or two with a scale to compute the area of each density zone and calculate the potential population, then add them up to get the potential population island by island, and for the county.

In the case of those areas designated “base” this could not be done since density in those areas is, for all practical purposes, unlimited. Perhaps “unlimited development district” would be a more appropriate term than “base.”

The figure could be further refined, at the expense of some additional time, to include the already developed parcels within each zone which are “grandfathered” in. The existing potential population then could be added to the “planned” potential population to give us the maximum the plan provides for.

This would doubtless be a startling figure indeed.

It would put the plan in perspective. In fact, it is difficult to see how any further evaluation of the plan can take place at all without this figure. It is the only way we can evaluate the limitations owners are being asked to accept against the problems of the future population.

elite resort communities everywhere in the U.S. Note that while SJC paid for this study, it is neither mentioned nor linked anywhere on the SJC web site. The only place this document is available *anywhere* on line is at the link above.

[The Path Less Taken](#) is a book of essays that discuss big picture issues regarding the choices we face. Readers are encouraged to read all the essays to learn about the complexity of the topic.

[Cost of Community Services](#) (COCS) Very short version: more people, higher taxes. For every dollar of tax revenue from new residential construction, it costs SJC \$1.32 to provide services to that new structure.



[KeepSanJuansWild.org](#) lays out big picture issues and many take-action steps.

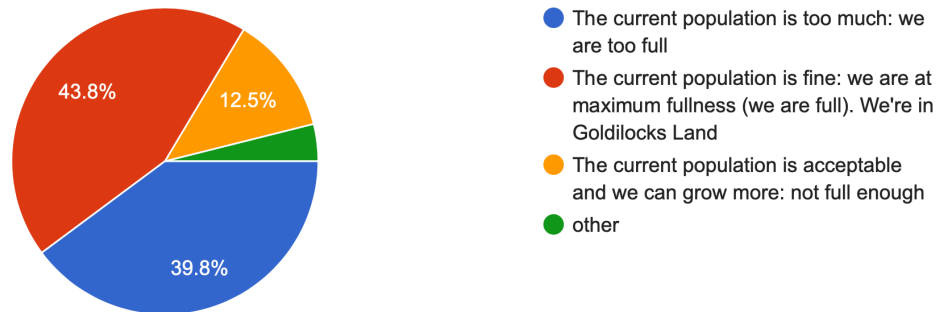
The editorial above (previous page), written in August 1977, speaks to the awareness that having a buildout number based on the proposed density map being crafted for the first SJC Comprehensive Plan is essential. As noted earlier, SJC did not and has not run the numbers and made them public then, or ever, including up to today. (With Cindy's statement about Erika mentioned earlier, clearly DCD knew the numbers but, in a common parallel with Hogwarts' mindset, Voldemort, now morphing as the SJC buildout population, was too fearful even to be *named*.)

Island Stewards, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, was awarded a 2024-2025 grant to help the overburdened and vulnerable population in the county to have a greater voice in the update to the Comprehensive Plan. Up to date information regarding the results of conversations and surveys is available at islandstewards.org. Full disclosure: I was the board chair of Island Stewards until we reorganized and became basically a woman-run non-profit. I have stayed on as Treasurer to maintain continuity while we search for additional board members.

To be clear, the CP update focusses on many elements of the Comprehensive Plan, but fails to communicate that the controlling factor on everything is *population*: water, ferries, emergency services, wildland fire danger, medical support, parking, the "crowded feeling" that locals have expressed in the following 2025 survey question:

What is your perspective on San Juan County's current population and future growth?

128 responses



The takeaway here is that over 87% of those surveyed believe that the current population is either maxxed out (i.e., at Goldilocks: Just Right ~44%) while an additional almost 40% believe that we are too full, i.e., *more than* maxxed out. Details on these survey results and local comments on the survey are available at islandstewards.org

Challenges to be overcome:

Illusion of independence / replace with reality of interdependence

Humans are not separate from and superior to all other life forms

Humans represent the zenith of the apex predator / we are an invasive species

Illusion of representative government / accountability not required

Most recent example in SJC: refusal of Council to take any effective and appropriate action regarding the impact of vacation rental permits and hospitality impacts in general, despite overwhelming and unprecedented public outcry.

Washington's Growth Management Act (GMA) does not require counties to consider the impact of visitors.

Lack of leadership among CC and relevant non-profits

Invisibility of these realities. Lack of transparency and proactive engagement.

Assumption of "normality" / Don't rock the boat. Me trumps We.

Talk is easy. Walk is hard.

Solutions:

Hold elected officials accountable / hammer the nail until it goes in / fatal assumption is presuming that electing new council members will not require constant review, supervision, pressure;

Develop continuous opportunities for thorough public conversation about where we are going and how we are going to get there;

Demand full, honest, transparent, thorough information about what is the current maximum development potential and the expected impacts of that developmental pressure;

Demand that the Vision Statement be operationalized: that the general language serve as definable and enforceable guardrails that *transparently percolate downward through the goals and policies of the comp plan and specifically to the Uniform Development Code (UDC)*. The UDC is where the legal rubber meets the road. All comp plan rules, policies, regulations, etc. should explicitly document how they point upward to the preceding/overlying component of the Vision Statement;

Explicitly map out the pros and cons of future scenarios, recognizing that there are major tradeoffs. Erase any illusions that we can have our cake and eat it too. Things will cost more no matter what. Costs are not just economic; economic costs are inaccurately low as they do not include externalities.

The big question is:

will we choose to pay for what we want

or

will we default to pay for what we don't want (our current position)

Distribution:

This document is available online to pass to others who may be interested in this topic. The document is at

doebay.net/bigpicture.pdf

(John Lewis)

JL: I wanted to do what I could to make things better, 'cause when you see something that is not right or fair or just, you have to say something. You have to do something. It's like a fire burning up in your bones, and you cannot be silenced.

from:

<https://www.ted.com/talks/>

[john_lewis_and_bryan_stevenson_the_fight_for_civil_rights_and_freedom/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/john_lewis_and_bryan_stevenson_the_fight_for_civil_rights_and_freedom/transcript)

Additional Support references and suggestions:

Vision Statement

The links below present the original and revised Vision Statements for the CP. The Vision Statement is listed as the “north star” of the plan; the CP states that the entire plan is built to fulfill the Vision Statement. (GMA states that the vision statement is a necessary and legally relevant component of the CP.)

[1994 SJC Vision Statement](#)

[2018 SJC Vision Statement](#)

Offering a Public Comment to the Planning Commission (PC):

- PC hearings are on the 3rd Friday of each month.
- Written comments submitted prior to 12:00 p.m. on the date before the PC hearing will be forwarded to the Planning Commission members and published online at <https://www.sanjuanco.com/1658/Annual-Docket>. Please email any written comments to sophiac@sanjuanco.com.
- To provide public testimony at the public hearing, join the Microsoft Teams meeting; contact Lynda (see below) for access to Teams, which is spelled out in the published PC agenda. Staff will provide a short briefing, the Planning Commission will hear public

testimony, and then they will deliberate and make their official recommendation to the Council.

- PC video recordings of hearings are available at: <https://www.sanjuanco.com/971/Planning-Commission-Meeting-Video>
- Please write the Planning Commission; even one sentence will matter! **According to a PC member, calling in to state your views is much more effective**

Read the [letter I wrote to the Planning Commission](#) if you would like ideas. Your letter can be short: speak to your feelings about the qualities of life that you want preserved;

Buildout Population Forecast:

For those of you who are nerds, skeptical, wonks and/or brass-tacks types, the following information presents the SJC population buildout data and its conclusions.

SJC produced a Gross Developmental Land Inventory (GDLI), from which a [summary of information](#) was generated. This spreadsheet summarizes the buildout potential in SJC by GDLI categories. The spreadsheet is information dense / all sources are cited.

Docket Submissions:

A formal process is available to any resident who wishes to have a change in the CP reviewed by SJC. This is called a “Docket Request”. The review process involves the Department of Community Development (DCD), the Planning Commission (PC) and the Council (CC).

I made my first [Docket Request](#) to SJC’s Planning Department (which was the “DCD” of that time) in 2001. The Docket requested a “truth in planning” evaluation outlining the buildout population and resulting expected impacts. The [PC unanimously approved](#) the docket request; CC ignored it. Similar docket requests were filed in 2018, [2019](#), 2021 and 2023. In all cases DCD, PC and CC ignored the request.

For example, here is my 2021 Docket submission, modified from earlier versions to introduce the legal background supporting the request:

<http://doebay.net/sunshine/Docketsubmission2021.pdf>

You can read my [letter to CC](#) submitted a few days before the 28 Sept 2021 public hearing. The letter includes references to the GDLI data should you be interested in running the numbers for yourself.

For a even more granular look at the process, the following describes the processing of my 2021 Docket request:

The Planning Commission (PC) held a public hearing on 16 July 2021 to continue the discussion of docket request 21-0003, following the 18 June 2021 PC hearing which originally brought up docket requests for PC's review and decision as to whether to recommend the various dockets for approval to the County Council.

You can find a copy of the staff report for this hearing here:

<https://www.sanjuanco.com/DocumentCenter/View/22943/2021-Docket-Initial-Briefing-Staff-Report---May-6-2021?bidId=>

The PC voted 7-2 against recommending that the docket request for a truth in planning statement be added to the DCD work order. The next step was a [County Council hearing on 28 September 2021](#), which made the ultimate decision about this request for honesty in SJC's future. CC chose to deny putting this request on DCD's work list. (You can hear my testimony at 1:48:47 thru 1:52:47 and watch the discussion beginning at 2:03:36 thru 2:25:00).

*Council's argument for not even calculating the buildout number re this 'truth in planning' request was that if the County "knew" what the buildout population was, **they would have to do something about it.***

Over [140 letters were submitted by residents](#) in support of Docket 21-0003.

They were ignored.

Separate but of major significance is the pervasive and growing income inequality issue. 20 years ago SJC was identified as having the greatest gap between the haves and the have nots of any county *in the country*.

An AI summary in June 2025 with the search request
"compared to other counties in America, how great is the gap between the haves and the have nots in San Juan County WA"

produced the following:

The Gap Between "Haves" and "Have-Nots" in San Juan County, WA:

San Juan County, WA, exhibits a significant gap between its wealthier and less wealthy residents. While the county is attractive for high-income earners like remote workers and

retirees due to its scenic location and amenities, it also faces challenges related to income inequality and affordability.

Here's a breakdown:

- **High Income Inequality:** San Juan County's Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality, stands at 0.52, which is the third highest in Washington State. A Gini coefficient of 1 indicates perfect inequality, while 0 represents perfect equality, so 0.52 points to a noticeable disparity. This indicates that income is not evenly distributed across the county's population.
- **Affordability Gap:** High housing costs are a major factor in the affordability gap in San Juan County. The median-priced home requires a substantial down payment and a high income, while the average worker's wage is significantly lower. This makes homeownership inaccessible for many working families.
- **Poverty Rate:** While the overall poverty rate in San Juan County is slightly lower than the national average, the discrepancy between those above and below the poverty line is widening. Additionally, children in San Juan County are more likely to experience poverty compared to the general population.
- **Median Household Income:** In 2023, the median household income in San Juan County was \$83,682. However, this figure doesn't capture the entire picture of income distribution, as it may be skewed by the presence of high earners, including retirees and remote workers.
- **Compared to the National Average:** The national average Gini coefficient for income inequality is 0.47. San Juan County's Gini coefficient of 0.52 indicates that income inequality is higher than the national average.

In essence, San Juan County demonstrates a considerable wealth gap, characterized by high income inequality, a significant affordability gap driven by high housing costs, and a growing disparity between high-income and low-income residents, despite a slightly lower overall poverty rate compared to the nation as a whole.